

Continuing Tradition and Celebrating Morpeth's Heritage

Morpeth is awash with anniversaries this year! 2026 marks 300 years since the death of original Town Hall architect Sir John Vanbrugh, 80 years of Morpeth Antiquarian Society, 75 years since the Clock Tower restoration and recasting of the bells and 60 years of Jim Alder winning the Commonwealth Games marathon.

Older readers will recall huge crowds welcoming local athlete Jim in 1966 at a public reception when the Town Hall and Market Place were the focus for civic pride and the townsfolk coming together to celebrate, as they have been for centuries. Over a decade earlier massive community efforts including the revived Morpeth Carnival drew crowds and funds so that the refurbished Clock Tower could be unveiled as Morpeth's main contribution to 1951's Festival of Britain.

The springtime Morpeth Northumbrian Gathering is another such massive communal get-together: it's run since 1968, briefly pausing for Covid, and organisers are ensuring the town's landmark events and buildings are at the centre of this year's festival, with its "Vanbrugh Revisited" theme among the many music and dance events over the three days from 10th to 12th April. The usual weekend after Easter is a celebration of Northumberland's folk music, dialect, craft, family events, heritage and traditions, centred on the Town Hall but also enlivening the town's other central halls and open spaces (including the Morpeth Castle Open Days on Saturday and Sunday).

Sir John Vanbrugh himself will be attending many of the Gathering's events held in his honour - in the person of actor Ray Alexander, who makes a welcome return to Morpeth. Ray was last here in 2014 for the Town Hall's tercentenary with his one-man show "A Life of Irony", which this year expands into the opening Friday concert "Sir John's Delight" staged in the grand Ballroom, with music from fiddler Stewart Hardy and Woosington Strings. Ray is looking forward to meeting the festival's new figurehead Morpeth Gadgy Ron Forster and joining in the annual festival of traditional music, dance, craft, dialect and culture. There'll be 1726-era music and dance dotted across the weekend among the usual run of concerts, dancing, stalls and re-enactments.

This year's programme includes events for audiences but also have-a-go workshops and competitions to give people of all ages and abilities the chance to take part in our regional "intangible cultural heritage". These worthwhile traditions of music, song, dance, craft and dialect can only live on if they are passed on to young people. There are already categories for junior singing, writing and craft, and after a pause since the pandemic the clog dance competitions are being resumed, including the Northumberland Clog Solo Championship.

All these are now to be joined by the Alex Swailes Memorial Award for Children's Speaking, being launched this year. Following the sad loss last year of the long-standing Morpeth Gadgy, that great performer Alex Swailes MBE, his family have combined with the Gathering committee and the Northumbrian Language Society to launch the award for the best performance by a child up to 14 of a poem or tale lasting up to three minutes, spoken in Northumbrian dialect or on a Northumbrian theme, preferably by memory. Why not encourage your family or young friends to have a try? The event is part of the friendly and informal dialect session at St Robert's Church Hall behind Collingwood House in Oldgate, one of the competition venues on Saturday 11th April.

Alex is also to be commemorated along with first Gadgy George Green on a silver panel on the Gadgy Staff, the large ceremonial wooden staff carried by the Gadgy when he welcomes the Saturday morning costumed procession to the Market Place. All being well the parade and short road closure will happen as normal, with a diversion around the town centre from Chantry Place to Manchester Street from

10.30 am to 11.45 am, and for motorists coming to the Gathering on Saturday there'll be a free Park and Ride from County Hall.

The full programme of April's events and competition details are at the Chantry TIC; also online at northumbriana.org.uk/gathering and the Gathering's Facebook page. The Patrons scheme offers a discount (see website) and the crowdfunding campaign to cover festival costs is at: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/morpeth-northumbrian-gathering>

Meanwhile, more special events are being planned for parent body the Morpeth Antiquarian Society's 80th birthday, including in September the annual local history exhibition in the Town Hall for Heritage Open Days – can you help with any memories of events in the Town Hall? Did you queue up for Saturday morning jumble sales? Was your wedding held there? Did you dance the night away at Chamber of Trade theme-night fundraisers for the Christmas lights? Let committee members know if you have reminiscences, programmes, photos or other memorabilia, at MAS meetings or during the Gathering.